Abstract

Purpose – This review aims to examine how photography and video have been used in a variety of fields.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper examines how these visual methods have and can be used in marketing.

Findings – Photography and video have important strengths. They help us overcome the typically fleeting nature of observation. They also allow us to record behavior in its situational context, allow for reflection, informants, coding, and use of the behavior or situation for illustration. In addition to their analysis of behavior, visual methods can also be used for the purpose of analysis of environments. Photographs and videos can also reveal insights into the interpretive side of the equation – examining people’s focus and interpretation of their behaviors and rituals. This visual information can be qualitative – aiming for naturalistic, descriptive, and “rich” data; they can also be used to quantitatively measure circumstances and events.

Originality/value – Understanding the potential uses of photography and video in observational research as well as their strengths and weaknesses will allow us to gain the most value from their application.

Keywords Photography, Video, Market research, Research methods

Paper type General review

Observational methods are becoming a more common practice in both academic and commercial marketing research. Given the moniker “observation,” a naive observer might expect that this would imply the importance of visual information. Yet, the visual aspects of observational research have not been at the forefront of most observational research. Instead, much of our “observational” research has focused on verbal self-reports (Harrison, 2002). The main reason for this is that most of the observational research that has been done to date in marketing has been based not on visual, but verbal ethnographic traditions (Lee and Broderick, 2007). This tradition is so dominant we often think of the term “observation” as being synonymous with “participant observation” (Lee and Broderick, 2007).

Belk and Kozinets (2005) called for marketing research to make more use of visual methods, especially video for interviews, naturalistic observations and perspective taking. Between a tendency toward a more visually literate population (Greenfield, 2009) and the lower cost of photographic equipment (Harrison, 2002), it is time for employing more visual methods. Photography and video should be a critical part of observational research and should be used in a wide range of studies, applied to objective or subjective perspectives and both quantitative and qualitative questions. This paper focuses on how visual analysis can be applied to observational research. We start with an examination of marketing and photography’s philosophical underpinnings. Previous use of photography in other disciplines is explored. Previous uses of photography
Philosophical underpinnings – the nature of reality

Marketing research is typically seen as based in one of the two philosophical camps – objectivist “positivism” or humanistic relativism (Deshpande, 1983; Hirschman, 1986; Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). Most marketing studies would be classified into one of those two traditions. According to Hirschman, the objectivist tradition believes there is a single reality, the researcher and the phenomenon are independent, statements of truth are generalizable, reality can be segregated into causes and effects, and there is value-free objective knowledge. The humanistic tradition, meanwhile, believes that humans construct multiple realities, researcher and phenomenon are mutually interactive, research knowledge is idiographic, phenomenal aspects cannot be segregated into causes and effects, and inquiry is inherently value-laden.

Importantly, the fundamental question underlying photography is a question of philosophical reality that closely mirrors that of the social sciences in general and marketing in particular (Prosser and Schwartz, 1998; Sekatskiy, 2010; Stimmson, 2010). The objectivist perspective believes that photography records reality “written by light” so that images reflect an omniscient recording of reality as it occurred and the camera acts simply as a mnemonic device that requires no special knowledge to interpret. This is seen in the term “documentary photography.” Some in this camp have even gone so far as to claim that a photograph is “an image without a code”, an indexical representation of reality to which it refers denotatively (Barthes, 1981, p. 88). An example is Eadward Muybridge’s early use of photography to investigate motion that could not be seen with the naked eye, most notably to discover if there is a point at which all four horse’s legs are off the ground (Collier and Collier, 1986, p. 12). The photographs were considered sufficient evidence to pay off a substantial bet as well as decide that conventional wisdom and artist depictions were wrong (Leslie, 2009).

Conversely, the subjective perspective is that photography is an intentionally constructed reality akin to the artistic “auteur” theory in film, where construction and interpretation of the image is necessary (Nichols, 1975). Sontag (1977) explains:

[...] as people quickly discovered that nobody takes the same picture of the same thing, the supposition that cameras furnish an impersonal, objective image yielded to the fact that photographs are evidence not only of what’s there but of what an individual sees, not just a record but an evaluation of the world.

Tagg (1988, p. 4) claims that the evidentiary status of a photograph “[...] rests not on a natural or existential fact, but on a social, semiotic process [...] [and] what Barthes calls ‘evidential force’ is a complex historical outcome”.

In sum, the photographic endeavor reflects a philosophical schism similar to one we see in marketing research – the ontological divide between objectivity and subjectivity. We believe that because the foundational philosophy underlying photography can encompass either objective or subjective philosophical underpinnings, research in either ontological camp can make appropriate use of photography (Harper, 1998). Specifically, photography can be seen as providing either an omniscient or subjective examination
of consumption and its context – a recording and documentation of events as it happened or a framework which can be used to understand these situations ourselves and trigger informants’ elicitation of their own experiences (Heisley and Levy, 1991).

Use of photography in other disciplines
A number of fields, including two of marketing’s cognates of anthropology and sociology, have embraced the use of photography and video for research purposes. An understanding of how photography and video have been used by these and other social sciences is important in understanding the applications and potential applications in the field of marketing.

Anthropology
Historically, anthropologists used photography to record and demonstrate exotic cultures. Despite the early establishment of this technique, there were some subsequent battles over its validity, especially among a growing quantitative tradition with concern about whether photographs are a valid source of data (Collier and Collier, 1986; Heisley and Levy, 1991, p. 258). But, with the resurgence of qualitative methods in the 1970s, visual anthropology also began to expand. One of the most notable of these early endeavors, Worth and Adair (1972) employed photography to study native Americans, and examined Navajos not just as subjects, but also as informants where they were asked to take photographs to provide an understanding of their own perspective. The recognition of the validity of photography is reflected in the establishment of the journal Studies in Visual Communication in 1974 (it disappeared in 1985 but was quickly replaced by Visual Anthropology in 1987). Perhaps, the seminal work in the field of anthropology is Collier and Collier’s Visual Anthropology: Photography as a Research Method (1986) which is important for explaining a number of possible uses of photography, and is credited with developing photo elicitation as a research method.

Sociology
Similar to anthropology, sociologists have proposed that visual images are an important part of their research, so much that their field may even be identified as “visual sociology” (Harper, 1998). Harper traces the roots of sociology’s use of visual methods to visual ethnography and argues that Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead in their work Balinese Character hoped that photographs would enable them to transcend linguistic and cultural frames, add context to the behaviors, allow them to cross-reference behaviors across occasions, and to provide a means to illustrate their observations to others (Harper, 1998, pp. 25-6). Harper suggested these functions should be important to sociology, too. Prosser and Schwartz (1998) provide a review of the use of photography in sociology. They start by explaining “any discussion of photography in the research process should begin by considering researchers’ underlying epistemological and methodological assumptions.” Their focus, however, is exclusively on qualitative applications including photo elicitation. Overall, photography and video is occasionally used and is a somewhat accepted practice in sociology.

Ecology and geography
The field of geography is interested in understanding our physical environment and ecology is interested in how living things live in and adapt to these different environments.
Photography has a long history in ecological research, and this is most typically remotely triggered observations of animals for quantitative counts for studying behavior (Kucera and Barrett, 1995). Cutler and Swan (1999) reviewed a good number of studies that used time-lapse and motion-triggered photography to study animals in the wild. In the field of geography, Crang (1997) examined popular photographs of tourist destinations to examine how people represented their world. This research approach allowed geographers not only to peer into the physical environment, but more importantly to examine how people understand and interpret the environment around them. Although not used extensively in these fields, video methods are employed in novel ways, most notably with a quantitative approach.

**Medicine and nursing**

Harrison (2002) believes that in our understanding of human behavior the visual aspects have generally been a neglected dimension. She reviews a few exceptions in medicine that made use of visual techniques, including ethnography, analyzing interaction, and autobiography. Harrison proposes these as models of possible uses of visual approaches, and she focuses almost exclusively on qualitative analyses. Riley and Manias (2004) reviewed how photography has been used in the fields of nursing and medicine. Interestingly, they find that a common conception is that photography is a form of documentation that can “assume the status of evidence” and can be employed to “faithfully capture what ‘really’ goes on”. This, therefore, is more of the objectivist tradition and world view. In their review, they categorize the use of photographs as documentation (and surveillance); therapeutic intervention; teaching, learning, and evaluating performance; research methods; and descriptive (instructional). Riley and Manias identified several common uses of photography including observation and photo elicitation, and others uses that have not achieved their full potential including self-portraits and video modeling. Video has been used to study post-traumatic stress symptoms in former veterans (Bremner et al., 1999). Similarly, Frith and Harcourt (2007) made use of photo elicitation to examine women’s experiences with chemotherapy. They also reflected on the methodology, which they felt allowed patients to capture their experiences and allowed them to reflect and gain insight from on those experiences afterwards. They believe that the photos allowed for a cues and glimpses of the past which guided their reflection.

**Previous use of photography and video in marketing research**

An examination of the use of photography in marketing reveals its use in a number of studies and in a variety of ways to examine consumption practices. Many of the uses can be traced to the cognates from which the marketing researchers were trained, most notably ethnography. One of the first uses was by Belk et al. (1989) where it was used as part of a naturalistic and ethnographic investigation of a swap meet. In that study, the photographic recording was used to supplement field notes. Photos recorded information on the general site for the researchers, as a device that was shown to remind them of the situation and their behavior, and as an external check (or “audit”) of the field data and conclusions.

Two of the authors of the previous study, Wallendorf and Arnould (1991), also used photography to examine Thanksgiving rituals. In this case, they had junior collaborators photograph their celebrations and arranged the photographs sequentially to document the temporal flow of events. Photographers also wrote a log of what they saw in each
photograph providing some background and interpretation of what was taking place. These photos were coded to inventory persons, objects, behaviors, proxemics, locations, types of shot, and their reactions to supplement to the logs written by the junior collaborators. The researchers also collected photographs from family albums depicting previous Thanksgiving Day celebrations which allowed them to examine the stability of celebrations in these families over the years and generations. In total, this study examined more than 2,500 photographs to provide an understanding of what the Thanksgiving ritual entailed.

At around the same time, Heisley et al. (1991) used photos to examine the entire season of a farmers’ market. The study used 1,377 photographs as part of a variety of data sources including participant observation, directive and nondirective interviews, development of key informants, journal entries, audio and audio/video recordings. The photographs were used to document changes that took place over the course of a season – a period likely too long to be remembered accurately. The researchers felt that the early photographs were relatively “naïve” as they had no pre-existing hypotheses or predispositions, and this was similar to the lack of hypotheses in their field notes. They used the photographs to record events and their timing as well as selection and the displays. As they continued their research, they noted increasing familiarity with the participants that was witnessed in the photos. They reported this analysis as a “photoessay.”

Heisley and Levy (1991) used photographs in what is they called an “autodriving” photo-elicitation technique to frame and encourage consumers to explain their own behaviors around family meals. The researchers watched and photographed three families as they prepared and ate a family meal. Then, they interviewed these families about their meals using photographs as “initial” stimuli and this was audio recorded. They discovered a number of themes related to products, roles, power relations, and conflict around the family mealtime.

In a break from traditional ethnography, Underhill’s (1999) company Envirosell makes use of photography and especially video recording of shoppers to understand everyday shopping behavior. Through the analysis of hundreds of hours of video recording, they believe an understanding of the forces shaping shopping behavior begin to emerge. They have, for example, proposed a need for a transitional landing area in stores where people can become acclimated to the environment, uncovered traffic patterns, and uncovered a need for space and time to shop.

Kozinets (2002b) studied activities at a Chicago Star Trek convention by videotaping and participating in many of the behaviors of “fans” as well as by talking to participants about the meaning of their activities. This employed a combination of participant observation with recording that allowed later reflection and illustration. He reported that these observations “reveal a world of fantasy, popularized space science, and contact with celebrities which serves to elevate, celebrate and decommodify fans’ consumption”.

Belk (2004) took Crang’s (1997) examination of photographs of popular tourist destinations one step further by videotaping tourists as they made photographs and videos at a variety of tourist venues. His reporting of the phenomenon was in the form of a video which probed the question of individual differences in what was recorded and provided a “meta” perspective on the process of making travel photos.

Some marketing researchers have employed photography to help the reader understand the context of marketing situations. Basil (2007b), for example, used photographs of Japanese “love hotels” illustrate the nature of the hotels
to an audience that would otherwise be unfamiliar with the business and its cultural context. By examining the pictures and text, the reader could better understand the context and operation of love hotels. Similarly, Basil (2009) used photographs to illustrate thematic connections between spring celebrations around the world. After drawing parallels between these spring celebrations, the reader could see how the celebrations of these seemingly disparate holidays were celebrated in similar ways.

Potential uses of photography in marketing research

One relatively obvious value of photography is that it helps to overcome the typically fleeting nature of observation. But, photography also allows us to record behavior in its situational context; it also allows for reflection, the use of informants, coding, and allows us to illustrate the situation or behavior to others. Examining how photography has been used in marketing and in other fields can provide precedent for our applications. But, considering any possible applications that have not been previously employed may also open our eyes to other strategic uses of photography.

General methodological paradigms

Qualitative uses. The application of photography and video has a number of important strengths for qualitative research. Photographic methods also allow us to record and analyze behavior in its situational context. The use of photography and video provides the researcher with time to reflect and analyze behavior. Photography and video are often employed in individual or group interviews, usually as an alternative to more conventional audiotapes or field-noted interviews (Belk and Kozinets, 2005, p. 129).

The application of photography as observational research may be especially helpful in the case of non-structured situations when the theory is emergent. By being able to go back and forth between representations of the situation and possible interpretations, the researcher or informant is able to consider and try out possible explanations. This practice was termed the “hypothetico-deductive” approach by Ball (1998, p. 132) and “synthesis” by Collier and Collier (1986, p. 15). For example, a systematic analysis of photographs was used to reveal insights into the celebration of Thanksgiving by examining which aspects of the celebration were consistent from year to year and across different families' celebrations and which elements varied across time or families (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1991). Content analysis of photographs (Schwartz, 1989) or advertising (Messaris, 1997) may provide insights into the marketing situation.

Photographs can also be used for the purpose of analysis of environments (Basil, 2007a; Heisley et al., 1991). In some cases, this analysis might reveal things that are not visible to the naked eye, similar to Murybridge’s study of motion or Hall's study of proxemics. This type of systematic analysis of the environment is the main focus of Underhill’s (1999) Envirosell’s consulting group and can be seen in their internet homepage which explains. “Envirosell is a global research and consulting firm specializing in the study of human behavior in retail, service, home and online environments” (Envirosell, 2010).

Existing photographs, videos or other visual online postings can also be used to reveal insights into the interpretive side of the equation – allowing us to examine people’s own focus and interpretation of their behaviors and rituals. For example, this may be revealed through an analysis of people’s snapshots of locations or events (Crang, 1997; Wallendorf and Arnould, 1991). Photographs and videos have also been used in “photo elicitation”
to probe people’s understanding and representation of their own behaviors, consumption activities, and responses (Frith and Harcourt, 2007; Worth and Adair, 1972).

Quantitative uses

The qualitative “participant-observation” model provides only a few of the possible applications of a vast and exciting set of observational methods (Lee and Broderick, 2007). Content analysis can also be employed using quantitative methods to examine photographs or advertising to provide insights into the marketing situation and context (Riffe et al., 2005). In this case, counts and other measures might be used to examine the prevalence of themes or depictions such as that used in cigarette advertising (Altman et al., 1991; Basil et al., 1991).

Photography can be to study and enhance our understanding of human behavior. For quantitative researchers searching for a way to achieve reliable measurements about behaviors, photographs can be used as a source of data allowing coding in ways that allows for assessment of intercoder reliabilities. Quantitative researchers can also use photos and videos for illustrative purposes. Churchill and Iacobucci (2004) give examples of quantitative observational methods such as head counts and physiological measures. Another strategy is to the use of visual record to uncover patterns and reveal insights into things that might otherwise be invisible to one-time participants, such as farmers’ markets over the course of a year (Heisley et al., 1991) or observed across different cultures at different times (Basil, 2007a). An examination of existing photographs or online postings, along the lines of a content analysis, may allow us to examine people’s focus and interpretation of their behaviors and rituals around consumption activities such as tourism (Crang, 1997) and spring holidays (Basil, 2009). And, although it appears unused to date, the combination of remote sensing and photography or video, as used for animal counts in ecology, might be employed to count traffic or to observe behavior in marketing.

Specific applications of photography and video

As field notes. One of the earliest and most frequently employed uses of photography follows the ethnographic tradition. In these instances, photographs are used to record visual representations of people and events. Typically, these images are employed as supplements to field notes; however, if the question is primarily or largely visual, there is no reason that photographs could not be the primary source of data. In the same way that photographs enabled Hall to discover rules of proxemics, marketing researchers may be able to employ images that allow us to reveal aspects of human behavior that we would otherwise miss. Perhaps, the best example of this is Underhill’s (1999) Envirosell Consulting Group which uses hours of video recording to uncover aspects of physical layout effects that affect purchase behavior. It may be possible to trigger these as time series or by movement.

Photos and videos as stimuli. Building on the tradition of many ethnographic studies, photographs have been used to examine participant’s understanding of events (Worth and Adair, 1972). Instead of just using photographs to supplement field notes, showing informants images of their own behaviors has also been found to be an effective way to trigger ideas and insights into explanations and reasons behind these behaviors. For example, photos and videos have been used in “photo-elicitation” or “autodriving” techniques. What has not seen much exploration in empirical literature, however, is the use of ambiguous photographs in a Rorschach-like scenario.
In a more quantitative approach to the same questions, photographs have been used in some research as stimuli for cord sorting tasks (Evans et al., 2002; Zavod et al., 2002). Respondents look through a number of photographs and sort them into piles that make sense to them. Which photo is in which pile then becomes data for factor analysis that is used to understand similarities in how people think about situations. These can and probably should make use of a sample of possible behaviors or situations.

As a data source. Photography has also been employed as a source of primary data. Murybridge’s early studies of motion and Hall’s discovery of proxemics is often seen as evidence of the importance of systematic observation made possible through photography (Collier and Collier, 1986, p. 21). In the field of marketing, Wallendorf and Arnould’s study of Thanksgiving rituals (1991) made use of over 2,500 photographs to document archetypical events, their flow, participants and their proxemics, as well as the stability of these celebrations over time. Heisley et al. (1991) used 1,377 photos that, combined with participant observation, directive and nondirective interviews, development of key informants, journal entries, examined and documented an entire season of a farmers’ market. Similarly, Basil (2007a) used photographs to compare traditional farmers’ markets in Canada and Italy. Despite some initial expectations about these markets, analysis of the photographs revealed deeper insights into the differences between these two countries that required the sort of hindsight and immediate comparisons that could best be afforded through the use of photographs as a primary source of data. Another possible area is the use of visual “netnographies.” Although traditionally conceived of in verbal terms (Kozinets, 2002a), visual information presented on the web could be a very useful source of data for studies of cultural practices (Basil, 2009). Finally, and alternative way of collecting photographs or video may be to employ the methods used in animal ecology of automated time series or triggering the recording by movement.

Photos as illustrations. A number of studies have been published as “photoessays” where the photos were primarily used to illustrate a phenomenon for readers. The use of photos as illustrations was suggested by Collier and Collier (1986, pp. 10-12). In marketing, Heisley et al. (1991) reported their analysis as a “photoessay” of a farmers’ market. Basil (2007b) used photographs and a video to illustrate the nature of Japanese love hotels to an audience that would otherwise be unfamiliar with specific aspects of the business and the culture. Belk and Kozinets (2005) have created an entire forum dedicated to videos as illustration – a consumer research film and video exhibit as part of Association for Consumer Research conferences – in North America and other locations.

Strengths. Photographs and videos have an obvious strength in helping us overcome the fleeting nature of most observations. As applied in anthropology, this permanence may allow people at later points in time or in different cultures to be able to see what was happening at the time of recording. In more proximal times, the recordings may be applied by qualitative researchers to allow a deeper understanding to emerge through reflection and hypothetic-deductive synthesis. As such, the photographic approach can provide naturalistic, descriptive, and “rich” data (Deshpande, 1983). The permanence may allow quantitative researchers to measure circumstances and events by coding and measuring behaviors.

Visual methods can also be used for the purpose of analysis of environments. Because they allow us to record behavior in its situational context, photographs and videos can
also reveal insights into processes that might otherwise be missed. Envirosell, for example, uses photography and video to understand how the environment can affect shopping behaviors.

Photography and video can also be used to understand the interpretive side of the equation – how people interpret their own behaviors and rituals as well as those of other people. This mode of inquiry may help avoid verbal forms of self-report that may be biased by cognitive constructions or blind to automatic behaviors (Moisander et al., 2009). By seeing what they did, informants may help the researcher to better understand their behavior and thought processes.

Finally, these visual methods are very useful for illustrating marketing behaviors and contexts to others for the purpose of illustration. Whether applied to looking into a different culture or time, or illustrating common activities that we may miss, as the saying goes “a picture is worth a thousand words.” Sometimes, a picture or video may be the best or only way to explain a situation to others.

**Weaknesses**

Confusion or a lack of understanding about how to use visual data has probably been the most limiting factor in its adoption in social research (Emmison and Smith, 2000). Most academics were strong verbally, and have had this modality stressed throughout their PhD training and academic careers. Generations of verbal-based research has further pushed our methods and journals to a verbal orientation. Between missing important visual information as well as many people who are not as verbally focused and a new generation that is likely more accustomed to visual media, greater application and understanding of visual methods will emerge. But, this will take time and effort.

Another limitation with video-based observation, especially when reported in the form of videos is a lack of accessibility. While written publications tend to have a long shelf life both in published form and through availability on the web, many of the videos do not share this distribution. Given the presence of YouTube and other web sites, however, this could be easily rectified.

**Conclusion**

The philosophical underpinnings of social research and photography include both objective and subjective perspectives. Importantly, however, this allows us to make better use of photography and video. Whether seen as objective or subjective, photography and video can be applied to either social science camp. Previous uses of photography and video can be seen in fields as varied as anthropology, sociology, ecology, and medicine. Many of the previous uses in these fields can also be seen in marketing. But, there are other possible uses that we have only started to scratch the surface on. Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of these visual methods suggests a variety of potential uses for photography and video in observational research and capitalize on its full value.

**References**


Further reading


About the author

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